

contributions on the historical background, in that the accounts will be more soundly-based and more nuanced than the casual gleanings from secondary works which are the rule in contemporary discussion. But more than antiquarian interest is required; a history of two-and-a-half thousand years of argument should contextualise current positions in the debate.

Most helpfully, these articles do deepen understanding of the complex evolution of religious attitudes to the embryo. They outline the history of the transmission of Greek speculation through Islamic science and theology to mediaeval Christendom and beyond. The crucial aspect of this process for ethics is that, from the beginning, understanding of the nature of the potential human being from pre-fertilisation to birth bore on its moral status. The metaphorical framework drawn from the agrarian culture of Greece led to an understanding of the embryo as plant-like in Hippocratic writings, as King shows. In Aristotle, though possessing soul potentially, it passes through stages, from the plant-like to the animal-like, when it acquires sensation. Already moral status is determined, since abortion should ideally be carried out before sensation 'and life' have begun. Thomist-Aristotelian doctrine, setting out a specific time-limit of animation, continues to inform Christian attitudes up to Pope Pius IX, who rejected the notion of ensoulment in 1869: 'life' was to begin at conception.

The complex details of the vicissitudes of the tradition found in these articles may prove daunting to the casual reader, especially where Latin remains untranslated, as in Brockliss's article on the embryological revolution in the France of Louis XIV, and it may be tempting to fall back on the more journalistic survey of fallacies in embryology through the ages by Seller, which sits rather oddly at the end of the collection. Dunstan's useful introduction and summary does however offer the chance to pick and choose in an informed manner.

Most of the authors content themselves with straightforward history of ideas rather than drawing out aspects of specific relevance for the modern debate. An exception is Goodman, who tacks on an anti-abortionist plea to an article on the Maimonidean view of the fetus as a natural miracle. Implications for the present are suggested more subtly by McLaren, who argues that it was neither new scientific observation, nor convincing philosophical argument

which changed canon law and civil jurisprudence in the nineteenth century, but rather the desires of the Church on the one hand, and the doctors on the other, to control the decision and the means of terminating pregnancy, a decision hitherto left more to the women who were the only judges of when ensoulment had taken place. At the very least this article reminds us that the question: *cui bono?* and indeed its converse, should be borne in mind in listening to the participants in debates today.

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## Moral Knowledge

Alan H Goldman, 224 pages, London and New York, £9.99, Routledge, 1990

Are some moral views true and others false? Do some people possess moral knowledge on certain matters while others languish in moral ignorance about them? These ancient questions have notoriously divided philosophers. Many, particularly in recent times, have been struck by the differences between empirical and moral questions and have supposed that, while talk of truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, is appropriate in empirical enquiries, it is misplaced in moral ones. Other philosophers think that the distinction between facts and values has been exaggerated and that the notions of moral truth and knowledge are philosophically respectable and indispensable. The one side holds that grasping the fact-value distinction is the essential preliminary to an enlightened view of moral life, while the other fears that it is the preliminary to the extinction of that life, for without the notions of moral truth and knowledge is not any view as good as any other and therefore is not everything permitted?

This book by an American philosopher takes up these issues. It is one of a series entitled *The Problems of Philosophy, Their Past and Present*. Goldman distinguishes three broad positions on the issue in question. Moral realism holds that the world contains real moral properties independent of us, or at any rate of our beliefs about them, which render our moral judgements true or false. Goldman identifies differing versions of this view in the philosophies of Hobbes,

Hume and Kant, despite the rather more common conscription of the first two into the ranks of anti-realism. Roughly half the book is devoted to an examination of this trio and Goldman is led to reject realism and their various versions of it. The second broad position that Goldman discusses, which he calls emotivism, holds that moral judgements express attitudes rather than refer to independent properties, and so lack truth-values. Rejecting this view too Goldman embraces coherentism, according to which a moral belief is true if it coheres best with other moral and non-moral beliefs. Unlike emotivism this view preserves the notions of moral truth and knowledge, but rejects the realist account of moral truth in terms of correspondence with moral properties. Goldman compares morality with law, for what makes a legal decision correct is not correspondence with some mysterious legal reality, but rather coherence with the existing body of legal propositions. Moral truth turns out to be more like truth in law, than like empirical truth.

The comparison with law is an illuminating one, but the moral case remains more complex. Moral issues display a great variety which may itself contribute to the persistence of the debate between realism and emotivism. If one is considering whether or not it is right to keep promises, then moral realism looks very plausible in view of certain evident facts about the human situation which seem to make the keeping of promises an unavoidable requirement of any morality. By contrast emotivism becomes more appealing in the case of sophisticated dilemmas such as that of Sartre's young man in *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, where the insistence that there is a moral truth about what to do seems very implausible. (Sartre picked his example shrewdly.) One way to advance the debate between realists and emotivists might be to enhance our sense of the variety of moral issues.

This is a solid but unseductive book. Uninvitingly difficult for the novice, the book may leave initiates with a sense of professional competence, but heaviness, unrelieved by any imaginativeness about the wider implications of this fundamental issue.

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